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ABSTRACT

While it is commonly assumed that marital therapists define their tasks as preserving marriages, most traditionally trained marriage therapists espouse a more neutral role: that is, facilitating a constructive resolution to the marital problem, whether or not that resolution ends up entailing divorce. Despite this professed ideal of neutrality, it is doubtful that marital therapists can avoid influencing the decision making process of those they counsel. This study assessed whether there are differences between the marital therapy intervention preferences of male and female therapists, and how such differences relate to knowledge about the effects of divorce on children. Since the perceived harmfulness of divorce may affect how marital counseling is done, this study predicted a relationship between therapists' beliefs about divorce consequences and their intervention preferences. A 2-part questionnaire, assessing marital therapy intervention preferences and therapists' knowledge about the effects of divorce on children, was completed by 15 male and 22 female marital therapists. Results revealed that both male and female therapists made use of similar counseling strategies. However, male therapists were significantly more inclined to make comments inducing a favorable attitude toward divorce. The observed gender differences may be partially attributable to demographic differences across the sexes. Contains five references. (RJM)

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Relationship between Therapists' Gender and Attitudes toward Divorce and Marital Therapy Intervention Preferences

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While it is commonly assumed that marital therapists define their tasks as preserving marriages, most traditionally trained marriage therapists prefer a more neutral role. They are typically taught to view their position as that of an impartial mediator. They try to do what it is best for the two individuals involved without influencing the divorce decision. Facilitating a constructive resolution to the marital problem is their goal, whether or not that resolution ends up entailing divorce. Despite the professed ideal of neutrality, it is doubtful that marital therapists are able completely to avoid influencing the decision making process of those they counsel. Subtle influences may take place as a result of swaying comments therapists make that may bias clients' consideration of their alternatives. To date, there has been no systematic examination of how this biasing process may operate in presumably neutral marital therapy. This study assessed whether there are differences between the marital therapy intervention preferences of male and female therapists, and how such differences relate to knowledge about the effects of divorce on children. Since the perceived harmfulness of divorce may affect how marital counseling is done, this study predicted a relationship between therapists' beliefs about divorce consequences and their intervention preferences. Those who believe divorce has more highly adverse effects on children were expected to make greater use of statements discouraging divorce and less use of those favoring separation during marital counseling. Those with more positive beliefs about divorce effects were expected to do the opposite.

Introduction

While it is commonly assumed that marital therapists define their tasks as preserving marriages, most traditionally trained marriage therapists prefer a more neutral role. They are typically taught to view their position as that of an impartial mediator. They try to do what it is best for the two individuals involved without influencing the divorce decision. Facilitating a constructive resolution to the marital problem is their goal, whether or not that resolution ends up entailing divorce. Despite the professed ideal of neutrality, it is doubtful that marital therapists are able completely to avoid influencing the decision making process of those they counsel. Subtle influences may take place as a result of swaying comments therapists make that may bias clients' consideration of their alternatives. To date, there has been no systematic examination of how this biasing process may operate in presumably neutral marital therapy.

Gender differences have been noted in a wide variety of situations. Some investigators have identified the relationship between gender roles and some types of maladaptive responding in psychotherapy clients, and have urged that gender roles become a topic of discussion in therapy in such cases (Klein, 1976). Others have argued that the therapist's gender significantly affects the therapeutic process (Johnson, 1976; Thomas, 1977).

Even though it is frequently assumed that gender differences are present, few studies have documented gender differences in therapists. This study hypothesized that therapists' encouragement of divorce would be mediated by gender. Male therapists were

expected to express more pro-divorce attitudes to clients in marital therapy than female therapists.

This study assessed whether there are differences between the marital therapy intervention preferences of male and female therapists, and how such differences relate to knowledge about the effects of divorce on children. Since the perceived harmfulness of divorce may affect how marital counseling is done, this study predicted a relationship between therapists' beliefs about divorce consequences and their intervention preferences. Those who believe divorce has more highly adverse effects on children were expected to make greater use of statements discouraging divorce and less use of those favoring separation during marital counseling. Those with more positive beliefs about divorce effects were expected to do the opposite.

Method

A 2-part questionnaire was completed by 15 male and 22 female marital therapists from 26 secular and Christian church-affiliated counseling sites. Of the 75 questionnaires distributed, 37 were returned.

The first part of the questionnaire, referred to as the Marital Therapist Intervention Scale (MTIS), assesses marital therapy intervention preferences using 19 Likert-scale items. The items were developed by the authors to reflect statements therapists make that might influence client's attitudes towards divorce. Nine items are worded in ways to emphasize both the value of remaining married and the costs of getting divorced; together these comprise the pro-marriage subscale. Six items describe therapist statements that highlight the potential advantages of divorce and reduce social inhibitions against divorce; collectively these comprise the pro-divorce subscale. The measure also includes 4 statements that are neutral with respect to divorce and marriage, worded in ways to avoid persuasion of either type.

The second part, referred to as the DKQ (Divorce Knowledge Questionnaire), consists of 12 Likert format items and assesses therapists' knowledge about the effects of divorce on children. These items were based on replicated findings from empirical research in the area.

Various demographic characteristics were measured (age, religious preference (DiBlasio, 1991), marital status,

parenthood, professional education, and years of professional experience).

Results

Pro-divorce and pro-marriage subscale scores were calculated by summing the relevant items from the Marital Therapist Intervention Scale. Summary scores on the DKQ were calculated for all respondents by adding the directionally adjusted item scores.

T-test comparisons revealed few demographic differences between male and female practitioners. The male and female therapist groups were not signigicantly different with respect to age or parenthood. However, there were differences in marital status, education, and years in practice across the gender groups. Significantly more female than male therapists had been divorced (41% versus 0%) and fewer females had doctoral degrees (18% versus 73%). The male therapists had been in practice significantly longer than the female sample ($x = 10.05$, s.d.=7.31, n=22; $t=2.23$, d.f.=35, $p<.03$).

Between-groups t-tests showed that when compared with females, males obtained significantly higher scores on the pro-divorce subscale, indicating greater likelihood of asking clients questions that encourage a positive attitude towards divorce (males: $x=23.6$, s.d.=4.52, n=15 versus females: $x=20.1$, s.d =5.60, n=22; $t=2.08$, df=35, $p<.05$). Male therapists were significantly more likely to ask clients "if you stay married, how would you feel 20 years from now, thinking you had lived your life with the wrong person?" than females (males: $x=3.33$, s.d.=1.63, n=15 versus females: $x=2.14$, s.d=1.42, n=22; $t=2.30$, df=35, $p<.03$). On the DKQ, male therapists were significantly more likely to believe erroneously that a

child's developmental stage was not a major factor in his/her adjustment to divorce (males: $x=4.53$, $s.d.=1.19$, $n=15$ versus females: $x=3.64$, $s.d=1.50$, $n=22$; $t=2.03$, $df=35$, $p<.05$).

Discussion

The analysis of gender differences revealed that both male and female therapists practicing in secular and religiously-affiliated sites responded similarly on both the Marital Therapist Intervention Scale (MTIS) and the Divorce Knowledge Questionnaire (DKQ). The failure to observe more differences on the MTIS suggests that therapists of both genders working with couples make use of similar counseling strategies.

Despite their general high degree of similarity, male therapists were significantly more inclined to make comments inducing a favorable attitude toward divorce. Male therapists scored significantly higher on the pro-divorce subscale, suggesting more positive attitudes toward divorce. This may be due to socialization differences that encourage males to value autonomy and freedom more so than obligation and commitment. As a result, male therapists may emphasize the advantages of divorce to the individual more so than female therapists. It is also possible that male therapists have a less accurate perception of the negative effects of divorce on children. While in this study the males' overall score on the DKQ was not lower than that of the females, they were more likely to fail to appreciate the fact that the child's developmental stage influences the impact of parental divorce.

The observed gender differences may be partially atttributable to demographic differences across the sexes. In this sample, the

fact that more of the female therapists were divorced may have caused them to be more conservative in counseling clients contemplating divorce. Future research using a larger sample including divorced therapists of both sexes would enable a distinction to be drawn between gender and history of divorce effects. The education and length of practice differences may also have contributed to the observed gender differences. Here, too, a larger sample would enable these separate effects to be assessed.

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